ラブライブ!
School idol diary

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01 - Nozomin's Spiritual Life

As I walk slowly through the schoolyard,
a snowfall of pink flower petals drifts in,
coming to rest upon the dry, sandy ground.
Whoosh.
A light breeze blows in, whipping up a hazy little twister.

And in the middle of that spiral, for just one moment,
I think I see something,
Oh,
it's a tiny dragon...

The figure I caught a glimpse of through the wind was so faint, and so fleeting, it was as if it were just a hallucination.
In fact, in the moment it takes me to refocus my gaze, it's already gone. It was so small and faint that I'll bet nobody else saw it...
Or rather,
There's a good chance that it really was just a hallucination of mine.
It had fully-grown horns, and a dreadfully twisted face with its fangs bared.
Small enough to hold in one hand, it vanished from sight in a split second. A tiny, little, illusionary dragon god.

It gets me thinking, *ah, spring's really come*♡

They say that all sorts of things start to emerge in early spring,
and I'm not one to disagree.
Though now that it's May, and you can't really call it early spring anymore, the light of the vernal sun brings forth the wind and flowers,
and the caterpillars and sprouting buds,
and dragons, and myself.
From here and there,
and from the world beyond, too.
I'm sure of it.
I don't know why, but I just get that feeling.
I just love the variety in this world.
It makes me happy to be alive in this world where the dragons, the wind, the flowers, and I are all treated equally.
Everything on this earth holds equal weight.
Whether faint or sharp, lazy or hectic,
fluttery or firm, everyone's equal.
We all bask in the light of the sun in spring, and in the aroma of the flowers.
It's days like these that make me feel thankful that someone as insignificant as me is allowed to be here.
"Oh, oh no,"
I cut that thought short with a dry laugh.
Oh no, oh no.

I'm starting to think that way again.
'Someone as insignificant as me'
Even though I'd made up my mind to stop doing that so long ago.

It's been three years since I've returned to this town after having followed my parents up and down the country due to their jobs.
From the very first step I took here, in my mom's hometown, I could feel the wonderful energy of the power spot here filling me.
I liked the place so much I decided to live by myself and go to high school here, and ever since then...
I've been living in the power spot that is Akihabara, where the mighty *Tenshin* and *Myoujin*, along with dragon gods, *kitsune*, *koushin*, and all sorts of other gods both great and small, come and go without a care year-round. It feels so nice to be here, it might be making me from my guard.
Off-guard, and relaxed.
Which brings us to...
Of all things, the school idol group which also suddenly sprouted up all of a sudden recently.
And I got caught up in the second-year Honoka Kousaka's crazy idea to save our school from looming danger, and ended up joining μ's too.
I guess I really did get too careless.

With that thought, I giggle,
and turn to look back as I reach the school gate.
Looking up, I see... our laid-back school, built on top of a hill.
My school, Otonokizaka National Academy.
Strangely enough for myself, I quite like it here.
No, maybe that's not the right word for it.
Rather, even though it's a school, it's kind of like the first place where I've felt that I belonged.
Like, it just feels like I fit in here.
In any case, it's also the first school I've attended for three years without any transfers, so maybe I've just gotten used to it.
As I start my third spring here, something I can't quite pin down fills my chest with joy.
School's always made me a little nervous,
It's been kinda my enemy, in a way.
But now, it's actually become a place that I enjoy going to.

The aroma of flowers covers me like a cloud.
"It sure is nice that I get to take it easy today, since μ's doesn't have practice," I utter to myself as I leave the school behind me.
Shortly after I decided to join μ's, I started to practice day after day.
Those hectic days made me forget this feeling.
Come to think of it, I used to spend every afternoon like this last year.
With nothing else to do, I'd just wander around afterschool on my own, wouldn't I?
Though back then, I'd feel this strange emptiness around me.
But today,
I've got a blank schedule until I get home.
I smile as I think about what to do.
Ah, it's been so long♪

So maybe I'll go visit the power spots around town again? Or should I go buy some t-shirts to wear to practice? Oh, doing some more fortune telling for the girls in class sounds good too...
I recall a scene from 30 minutes ago

♡♡♡♡♡

Afterschool, on a spring day.
It's only been a month and some since our new classes started.
The girls cheer as I bring my cards and divination sticks out of my bag.
"My fortune-telling's always spot on, but you can't change your fate once you see it, so go easy on me, okay?"
As I speak with a stern face on for show, their screaming only grows even louder
"Ooh, Nozomi, you're kinda getting scary♡"
"I've heard all about your fortune-telling skills! I just hope I get someone good♪"
All at once, the spotlight falls on me.
I've known the tricks to doing this for a long time.
I've been at it since our classes changed in spring, and you could even say I've got it down to an art.
Every year, when we change classes,
Every time I transfer schools and join a new class,
First, I make my way into a circle of girls with a reserved smile on my face.
I try to come off as mysterious as I can.
"Hey, I'm pretty good at fortune telling. Wanna try it out?"
Most of the time, they respond with a wave of cheers, and I'm instantly accepted into their number.
It's a survival skill that I picked up as I moved from school to school.
A little talent that I've had since I was little.
'Cause really, I'm not that good with other girls.
I've never been into fashion or boy bands, after all.
If there's anything that gets my heart racing, it would things like the local powerspots, blessed amulets, and the feeling of the great Fujin passing through the skies overhead as I take a scroll.
But it would weird everyone out if I told them that, wouldn't it?
Even if I there were some girls who wanted to hang out with, that gets me feeling like I'm in a horror story in its own way. I mean, I'd rather not have the genuine Hanako from the bathrooms follow me around, after all ♡
So, being the transient that I was, I took up this fortune-telling act as a way to make myself fit in at the schools I transferred to as soon as possible. As I look back, and remember how I'd do this in spring every year, I start to space out a little.
"Wow, Nozomi, what's this card mean!? Do they already have a girlfriend-"
An excited voice pulls me back into reality.
Flustered, I revert my gaze to the card.
"Hmm? This would be the Lovers card, wouldn't it? It stands for meetings and opportunity. Maybe they've already got their eyes on you too, Yocchan♪"
As I widen my eyes a little, another round of cheers comes. This time, their joy starts to infect me too.
When my fortune-telling makes people this happy, I feel happy to be a fortune-teller too, as you'd expect.
Lately, I've started to sincerely feel this way.
To tell the truth, I don't think divination's meant to be used on this small stuff, especially not for love. I don't think there's much of a point to it.

I mean, love is guided by fate, and its unpredictability is what makes it so exciting, right? It's no fun anymore if you already know how it'll end, and whether it's requited or not, I don't think it's really all that important which way it goes anyway. If I said that, Nico would get on my case about how I just don't "get" girls, though I wish she'd keep quiet♡
But, it's just,
All I want to say is, honestly, with transfers here and transfers there, I've had my hands full just making a place for myself at each new school I went to, so I've never had time for romance.
That's why I've never had a crush on a boy ever, and the reason love divinations have grown on me lately would be...
Just recently,
after spending my time around with girls as thrilling as they are, I've started thinking it might not be so bad to fall in love.
Is this also an effect of Akihabara's power spots?
It doesn't feel so bad,
to have room in my heart for such thoughts.
Ah, only the miraculous powers of the Myoujin could melt the heart of Nozomi, the lonely transfer girl♪ Just kidding!
Feeling rather refreshed, I say, "Alright, now for the big one!" as I take the divination sticks.
As expected, I get the super-lucky draw, and the crowd goes wilder.
While the classroom fills with cheers, the door slides open, and a teacher pokes her head in.
"What are you doing? Class ended at sixth period for the workshop, remember? Go home already!"
After a good scolding, the girls, still tittering with lingering excitement, get ready to go home.
I, too, quickly gather up my fortune-telling tools, in the process knocking a card to the floor.
It lands upright.
The Chariot card.
It represents advance, a new world, success and conquest, and a journey to another realm.
Hmm,
Maybe it's alluding to my own future, or maybe not?

♡♡♡♡♡

Hehe, thinking about what happened just thirty minutes ago, I suddenly come to a realization.
I've stopped walking.
"Ooh, it's the *kitsune*."
I've arrived at the local shrine to Inari.
The little shrine where I talked with Eli for the first time, just after I started school.
With her golden hair glowing in the sunset, she looked like a demoness, come to tempt me.
Thinking I heard someone calling from past the red shrine gate,
I smiled.
"You asked for me?"
Now that I think about it, my meeting with Eli might have been what brought me to μ's.
In that case, it's kinda like it's thanks to the *kitsune*'s power that I feel this way now♡
Well, I don't have any fried food to offer today, but I might as well pray a little.

As I turn around, in my eyes,
I see a thin strip of sky, cut off on either side by high-rise buildings.
The clouds fly across rapidly,
and atop the clouds,
"Oh, there's Benten."
A stunningly beautiful, black-haired girl.
With a calm, mysterious smile, she smiles,
and calls out to me.
Oh gosh, this is a real god- I think, and then,

"What are you doing here?" Benten speaks to me.
As I compose myself, I find the second-year Umi standing before me.
A member of the makeshift school idol group μ's, which I just recently joined.
"Oh, is that you, Umi? I thought that Benten had descended from the heavens."
Umi responds with a dry smile, "I'm honored to receive such a compliment, but unfortunately, it's only myself. I was about to meet Kotori at Honoka's house-"
I whisper to myself.
A demoness and Benten.
Perhaps Otonoki's a place where gods gather.
If look at μ's in that light, then I get the feeling Nico would be a *kitsune*, no matter how you slice it, and, Rin would be a sarugami, Hanayo would be a *kappa*, Maki would be a *tengu*... but I'll bet she'd get mad at me for that, so I'll let her be Konohanasakuya-bime or something,
and for some reason, Kotori's the only one who's an occidental angel, and Honoka would be...
Hehe♡
Oh no.
No matter what I do, I can't think of her as anything but a straw-hat-wearing *binbougami*, teeheehee♪

With me unable to hold back my laughter, Umi looks at me with a troubled expression and says, "Excuse me, did you hear that? I was wondering if you'd like to come with us to Honoka's house-"
"Huh? Oh, yeah, I heard you. Thanks for the offer♡ I guess I'll be going with you, then, hehe♪"
As I continue my stifled laughter, Umi eyes me with suspicion, but eventually she decides to take me to Honoka's place.

This is the first time in my life I've found such a fun place, surrounded by you goddess-like girls.
So, I hope we'll be together for all eternity♡

And, I'll give you all the lucky power I can muster, too♪

Comments♡Umi

Nozomi's speech always has a light, mysterious ring to it, so she can be a bit incomprehensible, though, would she be mad to hear that? Hehe. At any rate, if all sorts of things emerge during spring, does that go for suspicious persons too? Well, perhaps Nozomi would say that even that applies equally to all. "Revere heaven, and love people." Though I always act so inflexible, I'd like to try living as freely as Nozomi does someday!

02 - The Blessed Waters

Near the beginning of the rainy season,
Just before the coming of the brilliant summer, μ's became nine at last.

It makes me wonder, maybe this could actually be a surprisingly good omen for us.
People nowadays don't give it much thought, whether you're moving or getting married, your bearing and timing play a pretty big part in how things turn out, right?
If any of our meetings had come at a different moment, or in a different way, then even the incredible members that we have would all go to waste.
No matter how compatible two people are, if they meet too soon or too late, then it may lead to ruin.
Luck can be a rather tricky thing.
That's why, when I think of us, μ's, having come together like a navagraha with the arrival of the summer sun,
We wouldn't be complete if we were missing any one of us, and I just get the feeling that our luck's on the rise like the morning sun, right?
Hehe
On that day, I was enjoying myself and splashing in the water.
It was the Marine Day long weekend, just before summer break.
The school's pool was open to the public that day, and in one corner at the poolside, there was a training class in preparation for the coming summer break.
Though I may not look the part, I'm actually a pretty good swimmer♡
While we're on that matter, Nico always remarks that I only float so well because of all the fat in my breasts, but maybe she does have a point♡
As I dive right into the newly-opened pool, shining with the light of the sun, I find it to be a bit cooler than I imagined.
I shiver a little before slowly starting to swim.
With a splish and a splash, I cut through the water.
The cool water wraps around my body.
Countless bubbles, large and small, surround me and push me,
Onward and onward.
My body, having become a bit lighter than usual,
bobs in the water with a splash and a splish.
I press on, focusing on the goal on the far side of the cold water.
Freed of the weights covering me on land,
I glide onwards, feeling refreshed and carefree.

When I do this, it feels like everything bad inside my body's been expelled♡
The little mononoke that cling onto me as I pass through the street corners, the exhaustion built up from our practice sessions, the cold sweat from being caught napping through English class today, and all the shapeless worries inside me,
They're all gone, washed away by the cool water.

♡♡♡♡♡
"Ei!"
Having completed my purification ritual, I let out a little shout as I raise myself out of the pool to soak in the sun.

Ahh, I'm pooped!
Five laps in the 25-meter pool.
Maybe it put too much stress on my arms for my first swim in so long.

As I shake my arms, a member of the swim club on observation duty calls out to me.
"Hey, Nozomin, did you just get faster? If only you'd quit being a school idol, we'd love to have you on our team! With a kick like that, I know you'll do great. And you get to swim all you want over the summer, and then we don't really do much for the rest of the year so you can kick back and relax-"
I laugh nervously.
I don't exactly want to be in a club that spends all its time doing nothing, though... but actually,
Much like she said, before I joined μ's, I just kinda went through school without paying too much attention and avoiding any trouble, and delved into my own hobbies, I suppose.
"Hm, but see, even though I swim to relax, I don't really like getting serious about swimming," I say as I tug on the bust area of my swimsuit.
Maybe it's because I swam 250 meters at once.
When I swim, the chest area starts to slide down due to my movements and the water pressure.
Whenever that happens, I have to pull it back up again and again.
Ah, my cleavage's showing...
"Oh, is that so..." the swim club girl laughs with a complicated expression on her face.
"I suppose you have a point. With it jutting out like that, you'd be at a disadvantage thanks to the water resistance..."
"And I can't wear a binder in the pool, either♡ So, if I had to say, I think my chest would be put to better use as a school idol."
"Hm?" The girl tilts her head.
"Hmm, maybe so, but is it really okay for a school idol to have breasts that enormous? I believe there was this girl who was insistent that the slim, flat-chested look's better for modern-day idols, you know, that idol-obsessed girl from the class next door, um..."
And then,

"Oh, Niccochi! Speak of the devil! Are you here to swim too?"
I see Nicocchi popping in through the entrance in the fence.
Tiptoeing in while still dressed in her school uniform, and acting like she's on the lookout for someone, Nico appears not to have expected me to call out to her, and jumps up with a shriek.
"Uh, uhhhhhhh, not really, um, I just kinda forgot my swimsuit, but I still need someone to stamp me off, aaaagh, what do I do!? I wasn't expecting to find anyone so soon, nico!"

Nicocchi is unusually jumpy today.
The swim club girl gives her an odd look.
"Oh, are you here for the pool course? You have to be in a swimsuit here, so you'll need to go to the changing rooms first"
"Y, yeah, I know... But I totally forgot my swimsuit. But, since I'm already here and all, could you just stamp me off anyway? Nico♡"
Having regained her composure, Nico clinches it with a pose.
Then it hits me.

Hahah.
I see how it is♡

"This summertime pool course wouldn't happen to be the one that people who still can't swim have to take, would it?"
With an uneasy smile, the swim club girl replies, "Yeah, but we're all high-schoolers now, right? It's more something to make everyone try the pool out three times rather than something to force you to learn how to swim, so I guess it's kinda like turning in a report after you've got a failing grade, maybe? We've got a course going on today, but when the teacher isn't here, whoever's here on observation duty does the stamping."
Nico flashes me a satisfied smile.
Looks like she looked up when the teacher would be out before she came in.
Smiling in her school uniform, she apparently never planned on entering the pool in the first place.
Looking at her, I suddenly get the urge to play with her in the pool.
"Is that so? Well then, you can swim with me, Nicocchi♡ I'm a pretty good swimmer myself, so I'll teach you."
Taken aback, Nico responds, "Whaaa, no, no, I'll pass! You seemed to be having such a good time by yourself anyway!"
I think she forgot to stick a "nico!" to the end of that sentence.
The swim club girl backs me up.
"I really think you should let Nozomin teach you. I mean, she is a good swimmer. Anyway, I'll give you a stamp, but you should swim a little since you're already here."
"Uh, but I uh, I forgot my swimsuit, see?"
"Don't worry 'bout that, I'll lend you mine♡ Don't pay me any mind, I'll just borrow one for myself from one of the girls in swim club-" I say, thumping my hand against my chest.
Still uneasy, Nico eyes my bust doubtfully, then pulls back and screams in distress.
"No, no, no no! Are you insane!? If I wear a swimsuit that fits your massive peaks, it'll totally go all like, bloop and then you'll see everything!"
The swim club girl lets out a burst of stifled laughter.
Go, like, bloop?
What am I, a ghost now?
This only encourages me further.
"Quit whining and get in the pool. Or maybe you'd rather have me chuck you in?" I say, approaching Nico with arms outstretched.
"Noooo! I don't wanna get eaten by a kappa! S-stop! I'll tell the truth, just please stop! To be honest, I've been hiding this because it's totally not how an idol should be, but I swim worse than a bag of bricks!" She screams, clinging to the diving board.
Well, uh, I kinda already knew you couldn't swim.
Watching Nico's panic attack is so funny I want to prod her further.
But when I see her clinging so tightly to the diving board that she's turning blue in the face, a strange feeling washes over me, and I decided to pat her on the head.
"Don't you worry. Just leave it to me, the kappa of Kanda River, to teach you. It'd be a waste not to go swimming on a sunny day like this ♡"

I look up.
The blue summer sky is filled with the brilliant rays of the sun, continuing uninterrupted as far as the eye can see.
It's perfect pooltime weather.

And for me to be able to experience exciting days like these one after another,
It's just as Nicocchi says.
Idols really are made of miracles ♡
It's times like this that make me glad I joined μ's.
This miracle, that brought me to my beloved friends, the likes of whom I've never even met before in my life.
As I help Nico swim,
I once again look over her slim body.
She looks just like a middle schooler.
I feel a jolt in my chest.
As it turns out, Nico was kinda exaggerating about her lack of swimming skills. It seems that she can swim 10 meters, or basically the distance she can go before she needs to take a breath, without any problems.
And apparently, up until now, she just faked it during class. Well, at least she knows how to get by in life, but is that a good thing, or a bad thing?
So, even though she was so scared of being attacked by a kappa earlier, Nicocchi eventually relaxes, and starts to get the hang of swimming normally.
Every time she turns away from the kickboard to gasp for breath, I catch her eye.
She has a smile that's just overflowing with joy.
She's just so cute ♡
I think I'm starting to get why people like seeing idols in swimsuits.
It's not about being sexy or about the size of your boobs.
It's that unguarded, pure feeling.
That must be what makes swimsuit idols so special.
It's just as Nicocchi says.
Rather than oversized breasts like mine, it's really the slim, flat-chested type-

As I start to finish my thoughts and look down, Nico's head bumps against my cleavage with a squish.
"Yippee, goal! I've finally gone 25 meters!" Nico exclaims happily, but in the next moment...
As if to re-ascertain something, she rubs her head, and frowns a little.
"But still, what is up with that 'squish' sound!? That's just not fair, Nozomi! You've got gravure idol looks and swimming skills on top" she says, glancing at my bust.
"So anyways, Nozomi, does that ginormous bust come from your swimming? If that's the case, maybe I should start working harder on this. My parents never really took me to the pool or stuff when I was a kid, so I've never felt right in the water. Then the next thing I know, I'm the only one around who can't swim, so I started faking it, and ended up like this..."
From the look on her face, she's taking this pretty seriously.
That round little head of hers looks so cute.
"Hey, how about we go to the beach together over summer break?"
Nico-nii springs up when she hears me.
"Really!? Wow, that sounds nice♡ Let's bring all of μ's along, too♪ Wanna do some BBQ while we're there? I've never done that before! This is gonna be great!"
Sitting by the poolside, Nico-nii's become unusually unreserved.
And, lit up by her radiant smile,
I start feeling as unreserved as she is,
on this bright summer day.

I just know that this summer vacation, the nine of us are going to be like goddesses, shining like the sun.

Comments♡Nico

All thanks to Nozomi, I learned how to swim in no time at all♡ And though I'm thankful for that, I'll never forgive her for the rest of my life for letting the world know how bad I am at swimming! I swear, one of these days, I'll figure out Nozomin's weakness too, teeheehee♪ But either way, I had the time of my life playing with Nozomi in my school swimsuit♡ I'll bet all the Nico-nii fans around the country wish they could have been there too♡

03 - Gods Truly Exist in the World

Over summer break, I got a gift of Akafuku mochi.
These *ankoro mochi* are famous among travelers to Ise.
I sat myself under a tree and began to eat.
Siticky sweet, but melting in my mouth.
A heavily nostalgic taste.
It really is a bit different from what Honoka sells at the Homura.
As I eat, I think back,
And recall a time when I ate Akafuku *mochi* all the time.
A time when I could still feel those many presences around me.

♡♡♡♡♡

I was born in Akihabara, where my mom was raised. But, I moved soon after, following my parents as they went here and there for work, so I can't really think of any particular place as a hometown to me.
The other day, I looked at an old photo album. I was already in Nikkou by the time of my weaning ceremony, and my first *Shichi-Go-San* picture was taken in Hokkaido's Odori Park. My second was taken in front of the Daizaifu Tenman-Guu Shrine in Kyushu, and I took my first elementary school summer vacation picture with Konpira in Shikkoku.
Also in my photo album were family pictures from the Sumiyoshi Grand Shrine, Itsukushima Shrine, Meiji Shrine, and the Izumo Grand Shrine.
It's just all over the place. I was moving about so much you could never be sure on any given day where I might be tomorrow. If Honoka saw these pictures, she might say something like, "Wow, your family sure likes to go on vacation♡"
But that's not quite right.
I've just lived in that many places.
I mean, no normal family would travel 3000km up and down the country just for vacations, right?
Among all the places I've been, I'd say my elementary and preschool years, when I lived in the Kansai region, left a relatively big impression on me.
You can already see the influence in the way I mix their words into my speech, plus I'd fit in well with my airheaded and sloppy attitude, and even though I'm never in a rush, I can't resist a good deal♡
Hehe♪
The other day, I had Maki staring in disbelief when she saw me convince a shopkeeper at Omotesandou to give me a free keyholder. She was all like, "I've never seen anyone do that before!" But, it works more often

than you might expect as long as you just give it a shot, and life's no fun if you're always buying everything at list price♪
Not that I'm like that 24/7 either, but I do get the urge every now and then.
Haggling might be a special privilege for Kansai-dialect speakers like me♡
Oh, and…
The most important part of my life…
Might have started before kindergarten.
When I saw them.

The first time I noticed it was during the kindergarten movie night.
It was the first time any of us had spent the night away from home.
When it was still light out, we all had a great time eating *nagashi-somen,* then putting on our yukata for the *Bon-Odori.*
Finally, we'd all gathered in front of a big white sheet on the field, and the principal brought out his prized and ancient projector for our favorite movie, *My Neighbor Totoro*.

That was when I first noticed it.
Everyone cheered when Totoro came on screen. When the movie ended, I watched them immediately set off searching for baby Totoros around the trees in the schoolyard.
I came to a realization in my little chest. (Yes, even mine was little once♪)
Even if Totoros like in the movie didn't really exist, there were mysterious creatures standing before their very eyes.
There were so many of them.
I could see them all.
But nobody else could.

The suspicious shadows cast by the long-nosed *tengu* from behind the clouds, the little white spirits in the hollows of the trees at the shrine,
And the distant roars of the gods from beyond the *torii* in the mountains
Nobody else could hear them.
That was the first time I realized it.
Even though there were so many of them,
Standing in plain view.

Whenever I told my parents or teachers things like "There's a white wolf behind the shrine," or "there's a ghost on the wall out back," they'd just laugh it off.
I thought it was because I was saying something so obvious.
But I was wrong.
It was because they thought it was some childish nonsense from little Nozomi.
I didn't talk much about these mysterious, invisible creatures after that.
Nobody would believe me, and I didn't want to get treated as some weird girl.
I could see them, but they couldn't.
And I thought that was fine.

I should just ignore these creatures that nobody else could see. With me transferring from school to school all the time, without any childhood friends, I was always treated as a bit of an oddity in the first place. This was just another survival skill I picked up.

But, mysteriously enough,
As I grew up with that mindset,
Those mysterious creatures started disappearing from my sight, one by one.
Slowly, but surely, and then…
When I was little, I'd see two or three a day.
Then it was once every two days, once every three days,
Once a week, and then, eventually,
I pretty much never saw them at all anymore.

These days, once in a long while,
When the wind through, when flower petals fly by, when a storm's about to pass by, I just feel a weak presence, and nothing more.
If you ignore them once, and pretend they're not there, they really do disappear. That's what I think.
Everyone else believes they can't see anything, so they really do see nothing there.

When I talked to Elichi about it, she responded with a look as if she wasn't sure whether I was serious or joking.
"Isn't it just because you grew up that you stopped seeing that stuff?"
Her eyes were saying that it was just natural.
Were they just products of a child's overactive imagination?
Or,
Is it that people grow closer to the human realm as they mature, and gradually lose the power to contact with the spiritual realm?
I don't know the answers to that tricky stuff.
But, even though I can only catch a fleeting glimpse of them now,
I can sense so much, all throughout my body.
A new and different power.
The invisible spiritual power of the pristine earth, the lucky power that comes with the flow of time,
And, the happy power of human emotion that you can summon just by smiling, and the power of passion that comes from human kindness and love.

I still think that back then, the spring when I decided to settle down in Akihabara and attend Otonokizaka Academy, even though I couldn't have possibly known that Honoka and the others would be enrolling over the next two years,
I heard the footsteps of those wild, unpredictable girls.
Though I didn't realize it myself.
Just like the calling of the gods from beyond the *torii* in the mountains.

As I grew up, I lost the power to directly perceive the physical forms of the invisible gods.
But, in exchange,
Other gentle powers surround me now.

Gods truly exist in the world.

That’s one thing I want you all to know.

Whether it’s fall or spring, winter or summer.
When you’re walking, and an inexplicable breeze blows by, and you feel a cool wind passing through, that means you’ve got a little visitor.

And that visitor will give you a bit of strength, or you can just consider it part of Nozomi’s lucky power♡
Whenever that happens, don’t hesitate to try your hand at a raffle, game, vending machine, or lottery. It might just work out in your favor.
Good luck♪

Comments♡Rin
Yep, I feel like something good happens to me whenever I meet Nozomi♡ Like, we’ll all go out for ramen together after μ’s practice☆ Oh, and I’ve seen Totoro too when I was little♡ Whenever I went to bed with my stuffed Totoro, a huge Totoro would show up in my dreams! Then we’d fly through the skies together☆ Isn’t he great, Nozomi♪

04 – A Day of Major Misfortune

My entire body felt heavy from the moment I woke up.
“Ugh… I don’t wanna go to school…”

Reflexively, I start to crawl back into the *futon*.
Rustle rustle.
As I’m ready to drift off to sleep again, I realize something.
“I can’t do this, I’ve gotta make udon today.”

We’ve got cooking practice in Home Ec this afternoon.
And what’s more, each group of students is supposed to make their favorite regional dish, probably because the teacher couldn’t be bothered to think of any dishes to assign.
Like salmon *chanchan-yaki*, or duck meat *jibuni*, or chicken *nanban*.
Yesterday in class, everyone was getting excited about the foods they ate back in the country, or some dish they’d seen on TV once and wanted to try, filling the room with a fun, girly atmosphere.
So, while some teams decided on genuine regional cuisine, and some just went with some fried food they wanted to have for lunch, our team chose…

Kitsune udon♡
See? If the teacher starts cutting corners, so will the students.
Hehe♪

Our team was mostly girls from around here, for some reason, so we had a hard time coming up with ideas.
The foods this place is famous for would be, like, *amazake*, eel, and *manjuu*?
We did bring them up, but they all felt a little too serious for high school cooking practice.
So now it’s time for Nozomi the frequent traveler to shine! Or so the rest of the team probably thought as they turned their attention to me. And so, I decided to go with kitsune udon.
I’m a big fan of udon♡

Although I'm fine with it whether it's firm or soft, I prefer ivory-white noodles with just a little bit of give to them, and of course, it won't work without the Kansai-style golden stock.
Then, add a big, piping hot slab of fried tofu on top,
Plus coarsely-chopped green onion and a pinch of *shichimi*.
The taste of that tofu once it's soaked up the broth is just irresistible♪
And as an added bonus, kitsune udon is real simple to make, too.

So, just between you and me,
Cooking practice is really easy.
Just boil 250 cc of water for each person, then slip in some powdered instant udon soup while the teacher's not looking, then give it a stir, and *voila*!
The udon you can just buy at the supermarket,
And then, splurge a little and top it off with Kanda river udon tofu and it's just perfect♪
When I'm cooking for myself, I skip the green onion since it's too much work, but for cooking practice, I guess we can throw some in.
Hehehe.

I'm not a very good cook☆
Ugh, I'd actually been looking forward to today.
Fresh, hot kitsune udon for lunch♪
Having given up on sleep, I think about the mistakes that led me down this path in life.

The reason was because…
I'd thoughtlessly decided to pull an *omikuji* yesterday afternoon, on the way home from school.

The result was, of all things, "Major misfortune."
Since I've been visiting shrines on a near-daily basis, I've grown out of the habit of pulling *omikuji*.
But it'd been a while, and since I was with the three first-years, Maki, Hanayo, and Rin, I decided to do it.
They were together on a little shopping trip, and I'd showed them the way to the Myoujin shrine on the way.
Maybe I just wanted to join in after seeing them get so excited over the *omikuji*.
The results:

Maki: Meager luck
Hanayo: Minor luck
Rin: Major luck

“Ugh, why’d I get ‘meager luck’? Doesn’t that mean I’ve got hardly luck at all!? This sucks, how am I supposed to be the center like this?”
Maki seemed to be pretty jealous of Rin’s major luck.
So, I nonchalantly said, “”How about I pull a major luck and trade with you? My lucky power’s seriously something. I can pull major luck 99% of the time!”
I decided to take the role of the big sister and try to defuse the situation.
Flashing a wide smile, I whipped out an *omikuji* slip, and…

I never thought a “major misfortune” slip would come out.
The first one in my life.
I never knew how depressing getting major misfortune could be.

…

♡♡♡♡♡

Attempting to gather my senses and shake off the terrifying power of major misfortune, I get ready for school. I check to make sure I have my udon and green onions.
Finally, I look in the mirror, and… Oops, I’ve got a bed head.
And my face is kinda swollen too.
Major misfortune is a scary thing!
So this is the sort of bad luck I’m dealing with today…
I head out the door with worries looming over me.

I hear the loud *screeee* of a bike’s brakes.
Woaaaahh!

I scramble out of the way.
Oi! Not so fast, you knob! I ain’t ‘ardly even stepped outta me ‘ouse yet!
When I turn to look at the bike…
“Ow, ow ow ow ow! Hey, sorry! I haven’t really figured out how to stop yet…”
It was Maki riding that bike!?
“W-What are you rushing over here for? Did I ask you to come over or something?”
It can’t be for cooking practice… she doesn’t have that since she’s a first year. My dysfunctional brain tries to make sense of it all.
Maki pulls her bike out of the brick wall and, trying to re-stabilize herself, comes back to me.
But she’s still teetering and tottering… Looks like she’s still just a beginner.
“Ugh, this is why I hate bikes. Sorry, Nozomi. Are you alright?” Maki says as she approaches me, mindful her knee. It looks like she skinned it against the wall.

“Oh, I’m fine.”
I dodged out of the way, after all♡
I’m better at dodgeball than I look.
With that, I bend down to look at Maki’s knee.
Nothing too bad. This should do the trick.
I wipe off the sand on Maki’s knee.
“So anyway, why are you here? Is there some reason you had to ride a bike you can barely control so early in the morning?”
When I ask her, Maki stares at the ground, looking a little embarrassed.
“I didn’t really have a reason. It’s just, like…”
“Like what?”
“Like, you know…”
“Know what?”

“…”

Oh man, the way Makkii’s face gets all red when she’s about go all like, “Ugh, you jerk!” is so cute, it makes me wanna be a jerk to her♡
Faced with my echoing, Maki looks away and reluctantly continues, “Like, it was my fault you pulled that major misfortune yesterday, and it really got to you, right? I really didn’t mean to make that happen, so I got kinda worried…”
Oh, don’t worry, it’s not really your fault, I’m about to say.
But, looking at Makkii standing unsteadily on her skinned knee, I feel like I can’t really refute her.
Could that be my major misfortune for the day?
To have Makkii crash into me on her bike…
Makkii was so worried about me when she woke up, but she didn’t have much time so she rode over on her bike.
“Right, then! That’ll purge my bad luck for the day! Thanks a ton, Makkii♪” I say, hugging her head against my bosom.
“W-what the-? Stop it… I can’t breathe… Hey, wait a sec! You’re totally fine! Sheesh, and I got all worried for nothing.”
Maki starts getting worked up.
“Now, why don’t we go to school together♡ I love riding two on one bike. It feels like we’re a dating couple!”
And of course, Maki coldly replies, “It’s against traffic laws to ride two to one bike. And it’s not like I’m good enough to even do that yet, either. Anyway, we’d better start walking now or we’ll be late to school.”
Maki looks far more proper walking alongside her bike than riding it, it makes me giggle.
“Alright, let’s go♡”
My cute little exorcist. Hehe♪

♡♡♡♡♡

But actually, that wasn’t the only purging I went through that day.

When I got to the school gate, I split up with Maki as she goes to park her bike. There, I nearly run Kayochin before noticing her lying in ambush. But, it's too late for us to do anything about it, and I end up running into her.
Kayochin does have slightly worse reflexes than Makkii.
I'm still taking in this new encounter, while Kayochin panics, as the large Tupperware container she was carrying crashes to the ground, sending several wrapped rice balls rolling away as if on cue.
When I ask Hanayo what's up, she tells me I looked like I was in shock over pulling a major misfortune from yesterday, and made me a rice ball lunchbox so my team wouldn't have to go hungry if I forgot to bring my ingredients for cooking practice.
"Thanks♡"
That cheers me up, and I scurry around with Kayochin, gathering up her rice balls, and eating one while we're at it.
It's still got the scent of fresh seaweed. Delicious♡
I give Hanayo a tight hug, crushing a rice ball between her and my chest.
"N-Nozomi, you're hurting me…"
And that's my second purge for the day♡

And, after that,
Cooking practice happens in 3rd and 4th period.
I stay alert.
Maki and Hanayo already purged my bad luck, but that still leaves Rin for last and definitely not least. She's by far the most likely to make some sort of mess in the name of purging my misfortunes.
I make sure not to tip our pot of udon over.
I make sure not to cut my fingers while slicing the green onion.
And, soon enough, cooking practice ends without incident.
Everyone in our team enjoys some kitsune udon together.

Oh, and I didn't use powdered soup this time, okay?
This *is* cooking practice, after all. And with real seaweed and skipjack added, even I'm surprised by how much fancier it tastes. It looks like this is where my major misfortune ends… or so I thought.

♡♡♡♡♡

Zzz…
Zzz…
Zzzzzz…

I hear a strange noise through the door.
It's noontime break, and I'm standing outside the μ's clubroom.
I cleaned up after cooking practice real quick (All we made was kitsune udon, after all) and headed to the club room ahead of time to prepare for mid-day practice.
Opening the door, I see… Rin.
She's fallen asleep with her head on the desk.

Zzz…
She's making cute snoring noises.
Her round face is topped with short hair.
With her surprisingly pale skin and snoring coming from her little mouth.
She looks just like a *sonaemochi*♡
I start feeling strange.
I desperately try to contain my laughter.
I thought she'd be my final hurdle for the day, and here she is sleeping with that cute look on her face.
A smile starts stretching across my face,
And I get the urge to poke Rin's puffy cheeks.
It's like, you know, that feeling.
That feeling you get when admiring small animals?
When you see something so tiny and warm and fluffy and soft, you wanna pet it♡
I slowly approach her, sneaking a peek at her face.
Good, she's still not showing any sign of waking up♪
I get close to her face, and then…
Squish.
I feel as if I hear something when I poke her.
Squish, squish
Ooh, this is too much♡
Rin looks like a sleeping baby.
I go in for another, and then…
Click.
The door opens.

"!!!!? W-what the!? Nozomi!? What are you doing!? A-Are you and Rin k-k-k-k-kissing!?!?!?"

Turning around in a panic, I see Maki and Elichi.
The two of then are staring at me, dumbstruck.
N-No!
So this is what major misfortune means…
I don't even have the spirit left to explan.

What a bother.
Maki truly is a plague upon me.
I'd always had an inkling of that.
You've all been there, right?
She's a good girl, and she never means any harm, but she always shows up at the worst times, whether it's by fate, or personal clumsiness.
You know the type, right?
Oh, but of course I'm not saying it's her fault or anything♪

Me, Makkii, and Elichi.
There's been talk of the three of us, the brains of μ's, so to speak, doing PR activities sometime, but who knows how well that might work out.

Hehe.

Comments♡Maki

Hey! What do you mean, I'm a plague upon you? If anyone's the plague in this, it'd be Rin! Jeez, you always blame me for everything!? Hmph! Yeah, I'm sorry for running my bike into you, but I was only there in the first place because I was worried. Still, I can't believe Nozomi's udon was the instant stuff. I've tried it before, and it was seriously pretty good. She had me fooled the whole time!

05 – Dad's Camera

Clatter, clatter.
I dig through my closet, making a racket as I go.
"Found it!"
As my head emerges, dust covers my eyes.
"We've had a few memories together, haven't we?"
For just a bit, my words get stuck in my throat, and can't come out.
That is, despite the fact that my chest doesn't have room for much more at this point.

♡♡♡♡♡

"Wow, what's that? A camera?" Hanayo's shout is the first to greet me.
On that day, I brought in my big, old black camera, covered in scratches.
It's got a big telescopic lens on the front.
This camera's pretty heavy even with me holding it with both hands.
Don't even think of carrying it in your palm.
"That's a pretty old camera. Wasn't this a really nice brand back in the day?" Maki nods. She sure knows her stuff.
I nod and respond, "It's just an old camera my dad used to use. It's a single lens, non-automatic. In fact, it's not even digital. This thing still uses film. I remembered we still had it, and thought it might take some good pictures."
"Film? Oh, you mean like those Chekis or toy cameras!"

Umi chides Honoka after her outburst, “Honoka, it’s rude to liken that camera to a Cheki or toy. A nice, professional-use camera like that must cost a few tens of thousands of yen.”
“A few tens of thousands!?” Rin turns her entire seat around, while Honoka apologizes with her tongue out.
Flustered, I say, “Not really, this thing’s basically antique by now. It’s not worth much at all. But, I like it. I mean, I’ve moved all across Japan, right? My dad loves taking pictures, so he’d often take pictures of me with this camera.”
“You’re an only child, right? Your dad must have gave you lots of attention.” Kotori smiles.
“Yeah, he’d always tell me I was the princess of the house. I honestly don’t think I was ever that kind of girl, though.”
“But I’m sure you looked like a princess to him.” It sounds surprisingly convincing when Eli says it.
“Well, I wasn’t always like this. Maybe I just looked cuter back then♪ Anyway, this thing’s not much use now, but since we need photos to advertise for μ’s, I thought maybe a genuine camera would come in handy…”
“Waah, and that camera’s the only memento of your dad before he departed to heaven!?” Nico sobs and rubs her eyes with exaggerated motions.
“No, he’s still with the living…” I fire back with a wry smile.
Now that I think about it…
When was it?
When did I stop taking pictures with this camera?
I’m pretty sure that for a while after Dad gave me his camera, I used it pretty often...
He gave me this camera, telling me to take good care of it for the rest of my life, and take lots of nice pictures with it.

♡♡♡♡♡

I loved watching my dad take pictures.
It made me so happy when he called me his princess and took pictures of me, that I slowly gained interest in cameras too.
It must have been back when I was in elementary school.
Every time we moved,
Every time I transferred schools,
Every time we visited a new attraction,
Snap snap.
We’d take lots of pictures.
The album pages from back then are covered in pictures, some taken by my dad, and some by myself.
At first, it was all sky.
The camera was so heavy, it was all I could do just to keep myself from dropping it, and I’d accidentally take off-focus pictures of the sky.
I’d wanted to throw them away as failures, but my dad said these were also records of my growth, and happily put them up in the album.
Countless blurry pictures of the blue skies.
With the cameras back then, you couldn’t tell how the pictures turned out until you got them printed. Even if it was all sky, he probably thought it was better to keep the film until it was printed.
Yeah, that must be it.
Again, and again.

As I learned to take proper pictures, my dad got busier, and I started taking pictures on my own more often.
Photography's a good hobby.
Unlike sports and gaming, you can do it by yourself, see?
Nobody will look twice at you when you're running around on a holiday, taking shots with your camera.
When I'd just transferred schools, and didn't have many friends to play with, I'd often go on walks with my camera in hand.
At that point, I'd grown enough to somehow fit it in one hand.
Then, even later,
A little bit before I graduated from elementary school,
I hardly took any pictures anymore.
What could have caused that?
Did I get bored of walking around by myself, taking pictures of the scenery?
Maybe that's it.
But, I also did transfer schools just before graduation, and maybe that was it.
After transferring more times than I could count, I ended up at a graduation where I had no friends, or even anyone I could talk to.
I'm getting bored just thinking about it.
Hehe♡
Isn't that funny?
Not even I thought we'd choose to move then. My parents were sorry about it, but at this point, it was in for a penny, in for a pound.
I wasn't particularly attached to my old school, and up until then, I'd always put family first and moved with my parents. This was just what I wanted. Moving before graduation was no big deal… or so I thought.

But, it was pretty tough going through graduation without a single friend.
It was kinda like the teacher in charge forced me to be there, but I didn't have much of a mind to force myself into the groups of kids who were crying and saying their goodbyes, these people who I just happened to go to school with for the time being.
I just stood by the wall, minding my own business.
I'd smile or frown with them, and try not to spoil the mood.
After all, even I knew that I wouldn't fit in with them after they'd already been friends for six years. And, I had no idea how I was supposed to react even if they talked with me about the memories they'd had.
Of course, that's not my fault, and that's not their fault either.
It was just the fault of bad timing…

But, after that day,
I never felt like taking pictures anymore.
I don't remember taking pictures with anyone at graduation.
And the photo album of my childhood memories, with the ever-changing backgrounds that symbolized my life, fell into disuse as well.
Of course, the rest of the album is pages upon pages of blank white.
♡♡♡♡♡

“Looking at this, it seems I hardly took any pictures after my middle school entrance ceremony, huh?” I sigh quietly to myself after taking my photo album out of my closet.
I feel a little bad.
I apologize to my album.
I’m sorry.
And to my dad’s camera.
He used this precious camera to take so many pictures of me, and I locked it away in anger. I’m sorry.
And then, *rustle rustle*
I take a bundle of photos, freshly printed, out of a vinyl bag.
These are the pictures I took.
The pictures of me and the members of μ’s.

“They couldn’t get enough of that camera, and kept bothering me to let them borrow it,” I giggle.
I can’t help that my face is so dusty.
And it must be because I laughed a little too hard that the world’s getting a bit blurry.
The pictures everyone took of me,
The pictures I took of the members of μ’s,
They all start to blur, as if they’re so far away.
But, I’m glad that they’re reality.

I feel grateful for my dad and my camera.
Thank you.
I hope I’ll take lots and lots more pictures for my album from now on.
In happy times and sad times, when I’m laughing and when I’m angry, when I’m shocked and when I accidentally flash my undies,
I won’t hide anything.
We’ll laugh, and cry together.

Now that I’ve made friends I can share my heart and time with,
I feel like I must be the luckiest girl in μ’s.
After all, I’ve gained the most out of joining♡
Don’t you agree?

I’m glad I came to this school.
I’ll write down how I truly feel.
It’s supposed to be a secret, but I’ll cut prices today.
As a special members-only discount, I’ll sell you those photos for just 100 yen.
Maybe this’ll blow up into something big if I add a mail-order service.

Comments♡Hanayo

As the only girl in the family, Nozomi kept getting her photo taken alone, and eventually she started wanting to take pictures too. As an only child myself, I kinda get how she feels. That's why I had so much fun that day, getting my picture taken with everyone, and then taking their pictures too! I actually wanted to get everyone's signature on a picture, but maybe Nico would get mad at me for not having enough self-consciousness as an idol♡

06 – The New Year's God Has Come

Lately, I've been hearing about it a lot on the weather reports.
A cold wave's coming over the new year.
The weather forecaster, in a fluffy down coat, a muffler for show, and a short miniskirt was standing outside with her legs trembling.
How are you supposed to tell if it's really cold or not when you're dressed like that!? I think to myself on that winter morning as I change into my familiar red and white priestess outfit.
I tighten the cord around my waist, and with it, I straighten out my mind.
Yeah, even I gotta do that sometimes♡
Well, I wear the same stuff whether it's cold or not, so I really didn't need to watch the weather forecast, hehe.
I giggle to myself. It's a bit surprising how often I wear uniforms now.
On school days I have my school uniform.
On my days off I have my priestess garb,
And on concert days, I have my idol costumes.
Those are a kind of uniform too, right?
I look across my drab, *tatami*-floored room, glancing at one of the flashy μ's costumes hanging from one of the beams.
Tatami and *kotatsu.*
Sliding paper doors and closets.
The house is pure Japanese style. The sliding doors have been re-papered for the new year, and my room in the corner of my mom's old house is comfy and immaculately clean… but it's just so drab.
The μ's costume sticks out like a sore thumb.
Well, the pastel colors give it a springtime feel, at least
Hehe.
Passing my winter vacation like this, those hectic days with μ's seem so unreal.
I even start to lose track of whether they really even happened.
It's like my wishes turned into daydreams.
Woah, then what?
Am I being entranced by a *nicogitsune*? Well, in that case maybe this Nico-turned-*kitsune* could at least use her powers to launch ourselves into success.

♡♡♡♡♡

"Aw, nothing's really changed, even now that winter break's started."
I stare at the sky as I sweep the Kanda Myoujin shrine.
I sometimes take the time to meditate here.
This shrine, the home of the god of prosperous business, is situated right next to Akihabara station, and every year, the place gets filled up with various higher-ups from the nearby corporations. It always gives the NHK some material for the New Year's broadcast.
But even though it's winter break, the new year isn't quite here yet.
The shrine is empty too. Everyone was worked up over Christmas just a while ago, and the Kanda Myoujin didn't even celebrate the *Otori-sama* in November, so I guess it's not time for things to get exciting just yet.

Apparently the central temples are already busy making talismans and purifying their charms and the like, though.
Spiritual power or no, priesthood requires the proper qualifications. A mere apprentice priestess who's still in high school, like me, isn't allowed to take part in that important stuff.
With my parents away at work, they're too busy to come home over the New Year, so I've got nothing to do to pass the new year but laze about at home.
All of μ's are local girls, so most of them have family gatherings to go to, and the winter break around the new year is one of those rare moments when we don't have any practice, either.
And so, I came uninvited to sweep the floors at this cold, sparsely populated shrine.
Brr! A cold breeze passed by!
The dry air cuts into me.
I guess the weather report was right after all.
And it's not like normal people would want to come out to pray on a day like this, either.
But, I actually think this is a pretty good time for prayer. Though, that's not to say that it's not fun coming here on New Year's Day, with all the stalls set up.
To just offer a quiet prayer, thanking the year's god and sending him off.
But still, everyone's in New Year's mode by now.
They're doing the end-of-year cleaning and preparing to ring in the new year, so I'm about the only one who'd have time to come to the shrine around now.
My legs stop moving, and I clutch my broom and sigh.
"I'm so bored."
That was just me making excuses. I've just got nothing else to do.

And then,
"Hey there, Nozomi!"
An unfathomably cheerful voice rings out as if from the heavens above.
When I turn around, I see Honoka.

"Wow, Nozomi! Still hard at work over winter break!?"
Having just ascended the stairs into the shrine, the smiling Honoka takes a few small steps forward while warming her hands up with her breath.
"You're pretty tough, Nozomi♡ It must be hard out here without even a coat to keep you warm!"
I suddenly clench my pale, white hands around my broom.
"Huh? Why are you here? We… We didn't have practice today, did we!?"
Panicked, I try to remember what my calendar looked like.
Huh? Was I the only one who thought I had nothing to do? Was this a rehearsal day!? Don't tell me we're running the stairs in this freezing weather-"
My elbows twitch, and Honoka laughs, "No,no, Nozomi! I'm here to get some wine and charms for the family shrine! For New Year's, you know."
"Oh, just running errands?"
Taking another look, I realize Honoka's wearing some real girly clothes today.
A miniskirt, and a pink half-coat.
She's always in either her tracksuit, or a parka and sweats whenever I see her at practice, but everyone asks her opinion when it comes to idol fashion.
"You're looking cute today♡"
"Aw dang, you noticed? Kotori and Umi picked it out for me the other day, when we went shopping together. When I'm alone, I always get brown or maroon, but Kotori insisted…"

Honoka scratches her head.
Brown or maroon…
“Well it’s a good thing she did, then♡ You look good in that.”
Honoka looks about ready to jump with joy as I pat her head.
Her smile is like sunbeams cutting through the clouds.
“You mean it!? Wow, thanks ♪ Actually, when I wore this flashy coat out on this busy day, my dad warned me like, ‘Don’t you dare run off to play or go on a date now!’”
“Ehehe. Sounds like your dad worries about you quite a bit♡”
“Nah, he’s not such a nice guy! Seriously, he’s always grumbling about how it’s so busy over the new year. I swear, you should see the veins bulging out of his face. Like, he’s my dad! Why can’t he cut his kids some slack, huh!? He’s been working me and my sister Yukiho like mules from the moment we wake up.”
“Well, your family’s got that old store to run. It’s the fate of all storeowners’ kids. But from my point of view, I’m actually kind of jealous ♪ Keep up the good work and use your New Year’s allowance to treat yourself to something nice♡ I’m sure you’ll get lots of business over on New Year’s!”
I picture it in my mind.
My New Year’s gonna be just the same old deal
Nothing else to do, so I’ll eat some *mochi* by myself and give my parents a call. Then, it’s off to the Kanda Myoujin shrine.
Just more of the same.
With that, I feel a faint draft blow in from behind.
Aw, dang.
Am I gonna catch a cold or get an early case of hay fever from standing in this cold wave?
Honoka peers into my eyes and probes my expression.
“Really? Are you really that bored?”
I flinch a little, but cheer myself back up.
“Well, my parents move around for work, so they’re not living with me. We don’t have a family business or dojo or anything like Umi or your family, and no siblings either, so there’s not much going on for me. If you ever get tired of the hustle and bustle at home, come pay me a visit. There’s not much, but we’ve got this *kotatsu* in the floor that I think you’ll en-“
Honoka grabs me by the arm and cuts me off mid-sentence.
“Really? Then let’s go! You can come hang out at my place♡♡ You see, we’ve actually got a whole lot to take care of today ♪ Whoopee! I found a helper! Dad’s gonna love me for this♡”

Whaaat!? What’s going on!!?
I try to pull away, but Honoka’s hand is clamped down tight.
Oh no, her eyes are glowing now.
“C’mon, let’s get those charms and go!”
Nothing can stop her once an idea pops into her mind. That’s our leader, Honoka.
♡♡♡♡♡
The room is white with puffs of steam.
I can hardly see anything.
I hear vigorous shouting form within.
Yo!
Ha!
And again!
Okay, one down!

A white clump of *mochi* in the massive mortar in front of me emits more steam as it's pulled and squished.
I huddle up in a corner of Honoka's kitchen and try to not to stand out. There, Umi whispers to me in with a hint of surrender in her voice, "So, you've been captured by Honoka as well?"
Captured…
I realize from the resignation on her face that this is a yearly event for her.
"Does this happen every year?"
"That it does. Ever since we were in kindergarten… or actually, farther back than I can remember, most likely."
Well, that figures. Umi's said before that she and Honoka have been friends since before they were born, since they were still in their mom's bellies.
Umi's soft voice is accompanied by another.
"Off your butts! It's time to get working!" Honoka's dad shouts at us as he pounds the *mochi* with his oversized hammer.
"Sir, yes, sir!"
Umi bolts onto her feet as a disk of *mochi* flies past her face.
She's essentially part of the family at this point, I think to myself.
I turn to see the mochi landing on a flour-covered countertop.
"Come help us out, Nozomi♡ I'll do the flour, and you do the bean paste ♪"
Kotori, dressed in an apron and bandanna, smiles as she hands me a silver bowl of red bean paste.
"Woah!"
I touch the bowl to find both the paste and the *mochi* are piping hot.
Freshly-made *mochi*, and burning hot paste. I'm standing there, unsure of what to do, when Honoka's sister Yukiho plops down a mountain of plastic bags next to me.
"You'd better wake up and get a move on, or the next *mochi* will come before you're done. Chop chop!"
Honoka thrusts her hands into the clump of *mochi* with speed that stands in stark contrast to her usual clumsiness, promptly shapes it into a ball.
Impressed, I whisper, "Wow, she's a *manjuu* maker's daughter, alright."
"It's your first time, so just take it easy! Sorry for bringing you over so suddenly♡ But thanks for helping! We'll be able to finish early with you here. These are the Homura's special *mochi* packs, for the neighborhood associations' New Year's sale♡"
As she talks, she balls up more mochi.
Meanwhile, a white machine sitting on the floor in the corner, squarish and measuring about 60 cm on each side, rattles a little before the buzzer lets out a light *beep*.

"Aaagh! The next mochi's done!" Kotori screams and throws her hands like she's going *oh my god*, scattering flour everywhere.
"Kotori, calm down or-!" Umi fans away the flour.
Honoka's dad steps in. "Clear out the countertop, the white *sonaemochi* are next," he orders.
The *mochi*-pounding machine lets out another cloud of steam from its open lid.
Yukiho seems to take notice of me as I stare wide-eyed at the machine. "Even little *manjuu* shops keep a mocha pounding machine around nowadays♡" she whispers to me with a wink.
Wow, really?
I'm feeling a minor case of culture shock.
When I asked later, I learned that they first give the *mochi* rice a light pounding in the machine before giving it a proper kneading in the mortar and making it into the a smooth, flour-covered *mochi*.

At any rate, it's lively in here.
The Kousaka house is full of life as the year ends.
It makes me a little…
No, it makes me really happy.
Dang, this kinda thing might be pretty fun♡

The clock strikes 3.
I'm now sitting in Honoka's living room.
Well, I say living room, but it's actually a weathered *tatami* room with a *kotatsu* plopped down in the center.
Oh, it's not so different from my own♡
I curl up against the *kotatsu* and relax.
Ahhhh, there's nothing like the break that comes after a long day at work ♪
I can still hear Honoka hard at work in the kitchen, together with her mom, dad, and granny.
As I rest my cheek against the top of the *kotatsu* and listen to the echoes coming from the kitchen, Honoka comes in carrying a tea set on a tray.
"Good work today, Nozomi! Pretty rough for a first day, huh? Ehehe♡ Thanks for coming by, though! We appreciate it! Dad was happy to have you here, too. He says you're pretty good with *mochi* for a first-timer. Maybe you should've been born to a manjuu-making family too."
Honoka sits down across from me and pours out a cup of tea.
"Here you go♡"
The sweet aroma of *genmai cha*. I accept it and keep on resting.
"The others went on a delivery run to the neighborhood association office. They should be back soon, so how about some snacks first?" Honoka says, pushing a plate loaded with fresh *mochi* my way.
Ankoro mochi, *kinako mochi, ebi mochi, oroshi mochi, norimaki mochi*… There's just about every kind of mochi you can imagine there.
[mochi topped with red bean paste], [mochi covered in soy flour], [mochi covered with shrimp], [mochi covered with grated radish], [mochi wrapped with dried seaweed]
Anko and soy sauce, sakura shrimp and *nori*, all these sweet and salty scents come at me all at once.
Woahh, I can feel myself getting hungrier just looking at the steaming fresh *mochi*.
I realize that I haven't eaten or drank anything from the time Honoka recruited me at the Kanda Myoujin shrine this morning. I've just been rolling *mochi* all day.
"Sorry, mind if I help myself first?"
Unable to resist the lure of *mochi* any longer, I reach my arm out, but…
"Hey Nozomi, you've got some *mochi* on your nose!" Honoka laughs, pointing at the tip of my pose.
"When did that happen? We should get that off before it dries."
Honoka starts rubbing my nose with her finger.
Rub rub.
"Is it gone yet?"
Rub rub.
Honoka moves in, giving me an up-close view of her smile.
Rub rub.
"Hmmm, this one's a toughie."
Rub rub.
Oh man…
This feels kinda nice♡

I hope this goes on a bit longer… Aw man.
When I'm in this house… No, when I'm with Honoka, she throws me off balance, and I find myself wanting her to take care of me for some reason…
I feel light, and my heart races.
It feels so good.
It must be because Honoka's so cheerful, her power resonates with mine.
I close my eyes and let Honoka keep on rubbing.
"Hmmm, it's not coming off. Is it dry already? Then, uh… Sorry about this, Nozomi!"
I feel Honoka's breath on my face, and… mmh?
I open my eyes to see what's going on and-
Aaaahhh!!
I try to scream, but the noise doesn't make it out of my mouth.
The momentary distraction leaves me helpless to stop Honoka.
Chomp.
She nips me on the nose.
Honoka's face fills my entire field of vision.
Then, she pulls back like a falling tide and smiles.
"Okay, there we go♡ After a while, it gets too hard to get off without moistening it up a little ♪"
Honoka smiles triumphantly. I have nothing to say.
I'm… well, speechless.
I know Honoka's an innocent girl, but get real! I think.
But the next moment, I'm surprised by something. My face is turning red. I feel it turning red.
No no no! Do I seriously, really-
At that moment…
"We're back! It's so cold outside! It might even snow tomorrow!"
Umi, Kotori, and Yukiho came back from delivery at just the right time.
That was a close call. I was just about to cross over to the great beyond…
Afterwards, the five of us ate *mochi* together and rejuvenated our bodies at the *kotatsu*.
Eventually, we had enough rejuvenating and played Life and stuff.
For me, it was a bit of an early New Year's celebration.
It was like the five of us were sisters.
Though I'm supposed to be the oldest one here, it felt like I was the youngest of them all, just taking it easy♪
And that was the first time I had to share foot space with four others in a *kotatsu*♡
I feel like all that jostling might've given me some extra luck for the new year♡
But still, Honoka's one dangerous girl.
She's like μ's own powder keg.
It seems like fate always has me getting into unexpected situations whenever I hang with her.
Will Honoka keep dragging me around and bringing excitement into my life?
If she does…
Thanks a lot, Honoka♡
I had a great time today.
Plus, that totally got rid of my little cold, too.
Gimme a call again sometime♪

Comments♡Honoka

Jeez, if you like being in such a rowdy house all the time, then you're welcome anytime♡ I'll bet Dad would be happy to have you over too♪ Nozomi looked so at home relaxing in our living room, it was like she was our big sister! If we really were one big family, the oldest would be Nozomi, then Umi, then Kotori, and then me? Aw, but then what about Yukiho? I'm getting totally outclassed here!

07 - An Inevitable Day

Whoosh
Another gust blows past me.

I sense the coming of new winds along with the new season.
Well, by “new season”, I mean the new years’ season.
It’s still January, in the dead of winter.
Hehe♪
Still, we’re still at the start of winter break, and faint rays of sunlight create a halo around the sacred pines and cedars here.
So maybe it actually does feel like spring… or maybe not?
I smile a little.
Today, I’m here for a training session at the college.
I figured college would be a bigger, and harder-to-enter place, but it’s actually pretty small.
Maybe it’s because it’s in the middle of the city, but it does feel a bit like Otonoki.
Oh, but when I say I’m at college, that’s not to say that I’ve become a college student.
That’s still a ways off in the future for me.
I’ve just got some special business here today.
I sometimes advance my spiritual pursuits at the Kanda Myoujin shrine, but I’m starting to get tired of sweeping and fetching water and being their errand girl at this point.
Lately, I’ve been wondering if I should study priesthood for real.
I’ve already known there were colleges where you could study Shinto and Buddhism.
It’s just, although I really do believe in spiritual powers that reside in everything in this world, I wouldn’t consider myself a particularly religious person, so those things never really interested me much.
My view, if I had to say, is that *kitsune*, and Kanon, and gods, and angels, and *oni*, and dogs, and wolves, and monkeys and pheasants and everyone on Earth has some sort of hidden power within. So, basically, an weird fusion religion of sorts♡
But the ones with the most power of all would be us high-school school idols, μ’s.
Hehe♡
So, I’ve never been particularly interested in this stuff, but I’m not completely dispassionate towards it either.
Unlike being the head priest of a shrine, you don’t need any special qualifications to become a shrine priestess, but I’m thankful just for the fact that they let me watch them work, so it’d be better if I learned how to make *ema* prayer boards and *hamaya* ritual arrows and that stuff, right?
It wouldn’t hurt to learn the proper craftsmanship, purifications, and know-how for it sometime.
So, I’ve come to the Shinto department over winter break to study a few things.
Ah, I can hear faint chanting from a building in the back.

Kakemakumo kashikoki shinden no
Oomae wo ogamimatsurite
Kashikomi kashikomi momousaku ookamino
[O wise and awe-inspiring deity of the shrine, we offer you our prayers and humbly ask of you…]

The sound of the chanting causes my body to tense up.
It feels like my heart is…
Oh dear…
This is hardly calming at all.

What should I do?
My waters of my heart grow uneasy, and I recall a few memories rippling across its surface.

♡♡♡♡♡

“Okay, I’ve got my future prospects all set♡”
Nico scribbles something down on her sheet of paper and then dances about with a nico nico nii♪
I nervously try to peek at it out of the corner of my eye.
I was trying to be subtle, but…
“Hey! Nozomi! You can’t just steal a look at other people’s stuff if you’re not willing to show them your own, you dirty girl♡”
She clutches her arms against her under-developed chest, but her sheet of paper remains unobstructed, and on it, I see…

Career Questionnaire

Year 3, Class C, No. 29 – Nico Yazawa
Career/College (Circle One)
~~*First Choice:*~~
~~*Second Choice:*~~
~~*Third Choice:*~~
IDOL

All the strength drains from my body.
Is that what she's going with?
We were in the classroom, and it was the mid-day break.
This all happened a while before winter break.
It was past the deadline, and Nico and I were the only ones who still hadn't turned in our career questionnaire forms for the career guidance meeting. Since Eli kept badgering us about it, we decided to just fill ours in on the spot.
"What are you going to do, Nico-nii?" I asked as I tried to balance my pencil on my lip.

"This one's a no-brainer ♪" Nico cheerfully responded, immediately writing down her answer.
And the result was…
Well, one that I definitely saw coming…
But again? Really?
She hasn't advanced one bit at all.
Well, Nico's consistency might count as one of her strengths, if you wanna call it that.
The pencil falls off of my lip. As I fumble for it, I say, "Okay, but what does it mean when you say you're going to become an idol? You're going with a career? But being a school idol is a bit different from being a professional idol. You don't exactly get paid, right? Can you even call it a career if there's no pay? And can we really keep on being school idols in the first place? Even if high school year 3, age 18 is still borderline safe, as you say, we're not even going to be high schoolers anymore, once we graduate. I'm not sure you can really call yourself a school idol after-"
As I keep droning on…
"Nozomi."
Woah.
A deep voice pricks into me.
It sounds about two octaves deeper than the usual Nico-nii smile.
Wow, I never knew Nico could do bass. I mean, she's always going "I can only do high voices, so I'd prefer if I could sing the main chorus parts♡"
Still, I can't bring myself to say anything right now.
I nervously attempt to tease her back, but she stares me down with a serious look on her face.
Drawing closer, she cocks a single eyebrow.
"Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"
"N… No, not at all, sorry…"
With that, Nico backs off, letting out a snort as she folds her arms together.
"I've always been an idol ever since the day I was born, and I'll always be an idol until the end of time! Whether I'm graduating or not won't change that fact one bit! Besides, all my fans would fall into despair if I were forced to leave μ's over one little graduation! An idol like me, who's always thinking of my fans, could never let that happen♡♡♡"

"R… Right…"
Oh, governor. I prostrate myself, and force my doubts and questions into the back of my mind.
Oh well, I think to myself.
I think I'll write down "Idol" for my career choice as well.
Career counselling isn't so scary as long as you're not going it alone, right?
Hehe♡

♡♡♡♡♡

I look over the unfamiliar college scenery, with the prayer chants in the background.

Of course, I know I can't just stay like this forever.
I wished that the seasons would never change.
Actually, I still wish that even now.
But, I know that can't happen.
In fact, that's how my life has always been
One day, out of the blue, my dad has to relocate for work.
Like a thunderbolt from the heavens, an earth-shattering cataclysm hitting the reset button on my life all throughout my childhood, heedless of any of my own thoughts or intents.
Someone up high just pushes it on their own.
It's always like this.
Callously, helplessly thrown into a place I've never seen before.

Whenever I had just moved and transferred schools, people would gather to get a look at the new oddity in town.
But, once the honeymoon period is over, everyone goes back into their own friend circles, and things suddenly quiet down around me.
Sometimes you run into an air pocket, and likewise, sometimes everything around you turns into vacuum.
Then, all of a sudden,
A rush of cold wind blows in.
-273 Degrees C. An absolute zero vacuum.
It really makes me aware of how alone I am.

In times like those, I go to the local shrine.
Usually, I can still find the lingering presence of "something" there.
No matter where I am in Japan, they look mostly the same.
There's a red shrine gate, and old trees.
The thick foliage feels like it's purifying-
No, actually,
It's enveloping, hiding, and comforting me.
That's what it feels like.
Engulfing and hiding me, so nobody can see the tears in my eyes.
The *kitsune* and snake spirits and tengu up in the trees must be watching me right now.
I hear them laughing, *If you're so scared, then why don't you come with us?*
It cheers me up a little, but I still stammer out, "I'll be fine! I'm not ready to join your side just yet! I've just got a bit of time to spare today! There's still tons of fun things I've yet to do! I've been incarnated not as a snake or a *tengu* or a wolf, but as a cute girl, and I'm gonna make the most of it!"
Once I finish shouting, I hear laughter coming from somewhere.
Good luck with that.
We'll eat the crybaby girl some other day.
I let out a sigh of relief.

This invisible force is strong and kind.
Strong, kind, and reliable. But it's scary.
I might have felt a little better if I offered myself to them, but then they'd have chomped my head off the next moment.

That's probably something I just made up in my head, like Elichi says, but I've always thought that people get spirited away at times like these.
Strength and fear are two sides of the same coin.
So are kindness and strictness.
Something with a beginning will always have an ending.
Two sides.
Which side is μ's on right now?

♡♡♡♡♡

I leave the Shinto department building and head for the front gate, holding the bag containing my priestess uniform against my chest.
That's the end of today's training.
I feel so tired today.
Maybe because of my training, or maybe because I was overthinking things a bit.
I switch gears in my mind and quicken my pace.
Aw man, I'm pretty sure I've got practice with μ's in the afternoon.
I lower my gaze and break into a small run towards the front gate…
And then, I realize I've been keeping a nervous smile on my face the whole time.

"What are you doing here?"
I never told anyone I was coming here.
"I wanted to discuss something with you before practice, and the guys at the Kanda Myoujin told me you were here."
"Oh, I guess I can't hide anything from you, Elichi. I figured people might get the wrong idea if I told them I was coming here, so I kept it a secret," I laugh while looking over the college's sign at the main gate.
"Looking things over before you enroll?" Eli says.
She looks scary.
But, I know there's a kind heart under that exterior.
"Not at all. Since I'm already working at the Myoujin, I figured I might as well study it properly, and then one of the priests said I could go for training here. It was just a one-off course, not anything to do with the college curriculum proper.
"Hmph." Eli squints suspiciously at me. "That's fine, then."
"So, what did you want to talk about?"
Still sulking, Eli says, "Well, our next concert, of course. In February, right after winter break-"
Then, before I have any time to think…
I interrupt, "Let's do our best, Elichi."
The words spill out of my mouth.
My voice might have started shaking near the end.
As I stand in Elichi's embrace, I catch a whiff of her usual perfume.
"Of course we will. We're μ's. We're going to do our best to protect Otonoki forever and ever," Elichi whispers into my ears. "I was about to

blow a fuse when I found out you were going to check out the college all on your own, but I'll let you off the hook this time, since it was my mistake. We won't fail as long as μ's stays the course."
Eli's dependable voice echoes through my ear.

Oni are scary
Scary, but strong.
Strong, and kind.

Don't you all agree?

If I ever meet an *oni* so nice, I might just let them handle everything for me.
And then, before I know it, it might eat me up, from head to toe, heart and all.

Hehehe.

Comments♡Eli
Ever since Honoka started this whole thing with μ's, it's always felt we were teetering at the edge of a cliff, and the next thing we do could be our last. So, to be honest, I'm impressed we lasted so long. Now that we've started μ's, I feel like anything could happen at this point. So, why don't we just enjoy ourselves without thinking too much about it? It's you, my best friend, Nozomi Toujou, who taught me to be this irresponsible, after all.